1: Nadel E-5 (1934-1936) 1942
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CHAPTER III

INTRODUCTION TO NUPE KINSHIP

BEFORE attempting the analysis of the Nupe community we must examine certain essential aspects of the kinship system of the country. This description cannot claim to be more than a brief outline. It is concerned only with the main principles of kinship structure among the Nupe so far as they bear on the subject-matter of this book.

The basic structure of the Nupe kinship system is the *extended family*: all individuals who can trace their descent to a certain initial, nucleus family—a husband and his wives—regard themselves as related and as forming one kindred. The Nupe have only one word for kinship, *dengi*, which defines relationship in the widest as well as in a more restricted sense. The vagueness of the terminology reflects the inherent vagueness of this concept of relationship. The extended family is a fluid unit in two respects. First, as the women of the family marry outside, into other houses and families, their connexion with the family from which they come, although never admitted to have ceased entirely, becomes weaker and less effective generation after generation. Secondly, the constant growth and expansion of the kinship unit which this principle of reckoning descent entails leaves the boundaries and 'fringes' of the family unit only vaguely defined. People cannot, in fact, trace their descent back farther than two or three generations, and in every family there are a certain number of 'relatives' who are known to be *dengi*, related, without anyone being able to define the degree or nature of the relationship. Moreover, individuals and sections may split off from the main family group, move to other parts, and thus disappear from the view of the rest of the kinship group.

It is implied in these facts that the effective kinship unit is represented, not in the vaguely defined 'theoretical' extended family, but in that section of it which remains living close together—whose members keep, as it were, in each other's view—in the particular case, the kinship section inhabiting one house. This kinship section is, in fact, referred to as a 'house'—*eni* in Nupe. The Nupe reckon relationship in 'houses', saying, for example, that people belong or do not belong to the same 'house', that is, are or are not related. Technically, the 'house' is a compound of a number of houses (to be described later in more detail), which is enclosed by a common wall and possesses a common gateway or entrance hut, called *katamba*. The term *katamba* is frequently used synonymously with 'house': in enumerating the kinship groups of a village the Nupe will tell you that the village numbers so many *katamba*.

To some extent the house-group, too, is subject to the natural fluctuations of increasing or decreasing population. An overflowing population may necessitate the building of new houses and compounds, mostly placed close to the original home, but in some cases at some distance from it, in another part of the village, perhaps in another locality

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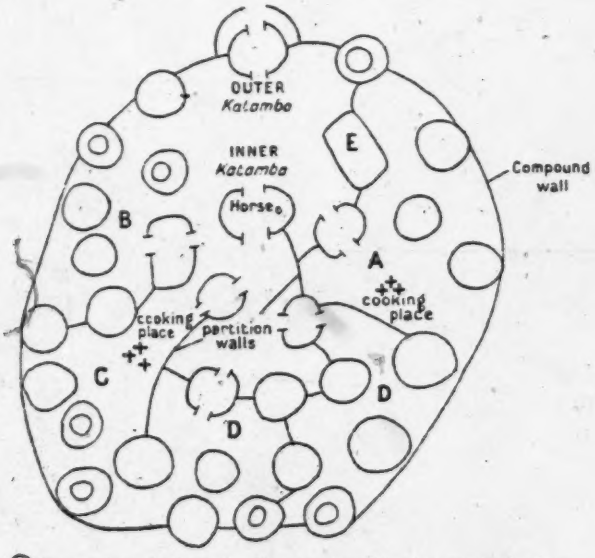
592 altogether. Thus one 'house' (in the abstract sense) may be found distributed over a number of adjacent compounds, occupying a part or the
596 whole of the separate cluster of compounds which constitutes the subdivision of the Nupe village, and is called *efu*—a term best translated with 'village ward'. Or we may find separate small hamlets, called *tunga*, which are regarded as dependencies of the original house and village.

HOUSE OF A VILLAGE CHIEF

[342]



○ Sleeping huts (C) Katamba A... partition of family head. B... partition of unmarried sons. C... partition of unmarried daughters. D... partition of married sons and younger brothers E... sleeping hut of family head. ◎ Granaries.

Both terms, *efu* and *tunga*, will play a considerable part in our discussions of the Nupe community. The fluid transition between 'house' and [621] 'ward' is reflected in the often synonymous use of the two terms: thus the quarter of the blacksmiths (*tswata*) in a certain village will be known both as *emi* and *efu tswata*, or the part of the village in which the chief (*Žitsu*) resides both as *emi* and *efu Žitsu*. Decrease in the size of the kinship group (owing to death or emigration), on the other hand, may cause the break-up of the house-group and lead the people to abandon their home altogether. Individuals who are left without a large family may join friends or neighbours as adopted members of their house.

592 In Bida the situation is altered by a number of circumstances peculiar
596 to the urban society. Space for local expansion being limited, families
369 are much more widely scattered than in the village, even beyond the

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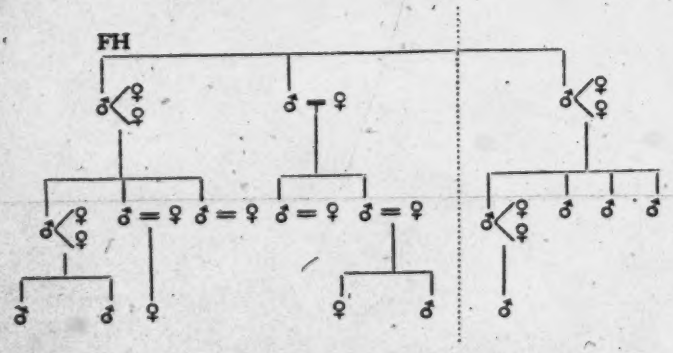
single *efu*, and the family section inhabiting one house is reduced to the smallest size. Moreover, independent economic position and independent, possibly even divergent, political interests and connexions cause adult family members to leave the paternal home and to set up households of their own. Even the wider local unit, the *efu*, is no longer based on kinship, but is largely replaced by a local unit the composition of which is determined by the factor of political allegiance and partisanship.

The size of the house-group varies widely: the largest group which I encountered numbered about sixty individuals, including men and women, adults and children. The smallest groups are found in Bida, and may comprise not more than six or eight people.

The effective kinship unit—the 'house' in the abstract sense of the word—expresses itself conspicuously in the recognition of a common family head, who is called, significantly, *emitsó*, Owner of the House. We shall learn later of the political, religious, and economic prerogatives vested in the person of the family head. Here I will only add that where a section of the house-group splits off from the main body and establishes itself in a new, separate, house it cannot claim to be at once recognized as a new unit, entitled to a separate *emitsó*, but continues to acknowledge the old family head. In the course of time the head of the new group may gain the position of an independent *emitsó*. The following diagram illustrates a case of this kind. The members of the family group placed to the right of the dotted line separated from the main family body in 1934 and moved to a newly built house in another part of the village (Kutigi). The reason given was that the old house had become 'too crowded'. The head of the new group expected to be recognized as *emitsó* after the death of the old family head (marked FH in the diagram).



The 'house' is subdivided into a number of family sections, each of which inhabits a division of the compound. The single section represents an even more effective unit than the house-group and its members enter a more intensive co-operation: they keep house together, eat together, and also form a common productive or labour-unit. No special

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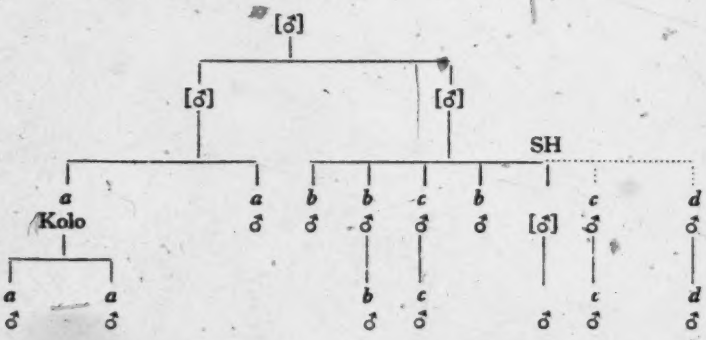
name exists for this group *qua* group, only a name referring to its organization as a labour-unit, or *efakó*. To-day these smaller sections are often reduced to the small individual family consisting of a father, his wives, and unmarried children; as often, however (and regularly, under traditional conditions), they embrace larger units and represent 'sections' in the strict sense of the word, cut from the house-group, and repeating its composition on a smaller scale. Such a section embraces, for example, a number of brothers, their wives, children, and grandchildren. The attached genealogy may illustrate the relation between the 'house' and the smaller kinship unit.

This genealogy shows another household in Kutigi whose family head is a certain Kolo, a man of about 50 or 55. Brackets indicate deceased family members. A dotted connecting line means that the nature of the relationship cannot be ascertained concretely but is only referred to vaguely as implying relationship of 'younger brothers'. Family members working together in the same *efakó* group are marked with the same letters (e.g. all individuals marked *a* form one *efakó* group, all individuals marked *b* another, &c.). The family members marked SH have left the original family home and have built themselves a separate house. Women and small children are ignored in the chart.



Each of the sections of the house may one day contribute the family head for the group at large. The position of the family head falls to the senior male member of the house-group, who is succeeded by his younger brother in the classificatory sense, i.e. the man next in seniority of the same generation, and, when the generation is exhausted, by the oldest man of the next generation, i.e. the eldest son of the eldest brother. This rule, however, is not applied rigidly and allows of some latitude so that personal qualifications can also be taken into account. Especially is this so where succession to family headship entails the assumption of a certain important position in the community (e.g. priesthood, or position of an elder). This brings us to the question of the transmission of rights and duties vested in family membership and to the method of reckoning descent.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND POLITICAL SYSTEM

LOCAL AND KINSHIP GROUPING

Descent and succession to offices and the inheritance of rights to land and other property are normally patrilineal among all Nupe. At the same time kin ties traced through the mother may afford opportunities for advancement and, especially in Bida the capital, maternal connections with persons of rank may be used to advantage in the political sphere. The Nupe term *dengi* connotes kinship in the widest sense to include all recognized cognates, but the effective *dengi* of an individual consists mainly of his agnates or patrilineal relatives descended from a common ancestor several generations back. Maternal kin ties, on the other hand, are rarely traced or effective beyond one or two generations. Groups of male patrikin are significant both as the nuclei of residential groups in extended families and in the status system of the chiefdom.

The domestic unit is usually an elementary or polygynous family, i.e., a man, his wife or wives, and unmarried children.[1] This, or a larger group consisting of a man, his wives, married sons, their wives and children, or of a set of brothers, their wives, children, and grandchildren, the nucleus of which is thus a patrilineage of small span, inhabits a division of the compound, keeps house and eats in common, and forms a single productive or labour unit. No special name exists for this group apart from that referring to its organization as a labour unit or *efakó*. The larger unit was formerly general, but under modern conditions the family has tended to divide when sons become adult. The domestic family normally forms part of a larger social unit, the "house" (*emi*), which is both a kinship and a territorial group and may also be referred to as a *katamba*, a term for the common gateway or entrance to an enclosed compound. An *emi* may be localized in one compound or may be distributed over a number of adjacent compounds, occupying either the whole or part of a ward (*efu*). In Bida the *emi* tends to be more widely scattered. The nucleus of an *emi* again consists of a body of patrikin to which wives and others are attached. Its head is known as the *emitsó* ("owner of the house"), a position which falls to the senior male member of the group, who is succeeded by the next in seniority of the same generation, and so on. When a section of an *emi* separates physically it continues to recognize its former head while he lives, but on his death it often attains an independent position with its own head. The size of the *emi* varies considerably. In Bida, those of commoners are often small and may contain no more than six or eight individuals; in the smaller settlements and among the nobility they may include as many as 60 persons.

Beyond these groups the Nupe also often recognize kinship over a still wider field. Thus a whole village may be regarded as descended from one ancestor, but such essentially mythical kinship links do not involve any specific kinship claims and obligations.

The three royal houses of Nupe may be regarded as large lineages or "clans," for they claim to observe rigid patrilineal descent believed to have proceeded from sanctified "first ancestors."

FORMS OF SETTLEMENT: HOUSE TYPES[2]

Nupe live in compact villages or towns (*ezi* is the term for both) which vary considerably in size; in Bida Emirate, besides the capital, there are three considerable settlements: Doko (800), Mokwa (2,000), Kutigi (3,000). Some, on the other

[1] Nadel, 1942, pp. 25–33.

[2] Nadel, 1942, pp. 24, 27–32, 34, 36– , 226–7; 1938; Temple, 1919, p. 334; Malam Aliyu Bida, notes, ed. Harris.